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FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
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INFO RUEHC/CV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 9763
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ JAN LIMA 5774
RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA 1070
RUEHQ/T/AMEMBASSY QUITO 6481
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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR VISIT OF ADMIRAL MULLEN, CJCS

Summary

¶1. (U) Post welcomes the January 16-18 visit of Admiral Michael G. Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to Bogota. Your delegation will visit Colombia in the midst of a dramatic transformation, one in which U.S. assistance is playing a powerful role. The Colombia of 2008 is far safer, economically stronger, better governed and more democratic than it has been in decades. Murder rates have declined 40 percent since 2002, and kidnapping rates have plummeted 76 percent. Murders of union members fell 70 percent during the same period, and civil society and political parties enjoy much greater political space. Increased security has led to an economic boom that has reduced poverty by 20 percent since **¶2002**. More than 40,000 combatants, mostly paramilitaries, have laid down their arms and most are participating in GOC reintegration programs.

¶2. (SBU) Still, Colombia remains a work in progress. Consolidating recent gains and making further progress on human rights, security, and poverty reduction represent the greatest challenges for the remaining 2 1/2 years of the Uribe Administration. Our continued commitment to Colombia -- through Plan Colombia support and approval of the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Act (CTPA) -- will help lock in Colombia's democratic security gains and contribute to a Colombia that provides security and opportunity to all its citizens. End Summary.

CTPA Solidifies Advances:
Investment, Poverty, and Security

¶3. (U) Improved security and President Alvaro Uribe's economic reforms have spurred the economy. GDP growth approached seven percent in 2007 after averaging more than five percent annually since 2003. Colombia's trade volume has grown more than 65 percent in the same period. The United States remains Colombia's largest trade partner (approximately 40 percent of exports and 26 percent of imports), though Colombia's trade with Venezuela has soared in the last two years and Colombia could shift to agricultural imports from Canada and the European Union if trade negotiations conclude in 2008. Colombia already receives duty-free access for most of its exports to the U.S. under the Andean Trade Preferences Act (ATPA), which expires February 29, 2008, while U.S. exports to Colombia currently face an average tariff of almost 20 percent. Investors from

around the world are increasingly investing in Colombia in anticipation of the CTPA. In 2007, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) exceeded \$7.5 billion, 350 percent greater than FDI in 2002.

¶4. (SBU) The Colombian Congress ratified the CTPA in 2007 by a substantial margin, and it remains the Colombian government's highest economic priority. Delays in U.S. approval or rejection of the accord would serve as a severe political and economic blow to Uribe and his policy of strengthened ties with the United States. Analysts expect the agreement to add between one and two percent annual GDP growth to the local economy. This increased economic growth is crucial to generating the formal sector employment necessary for Uribe to meet his goal of reducing the poverty rate from 45 percent to 35 percent by 2010. Trade-based formal sector growth will also provide the GOC with additional fiscal resources to shoulder a larger portion of its security costs as USG Plan Colombia support decreases.

Democratic Security

¶5. (U) The establishment of greater Colombian government territorial control and the paramilitary demobilization have created the space for civil society and political parties to operate more openly than ever before. The Government maintains a police presence in all 1099 municipalities for the first time in history. Increased security of roads and highways have allowed for greater freedom of movement for people and commerce. Local elections in October showcased these gains with over 86,000 candidates participating. The leftist Polo Democratico Party (PDA) won 1.2 million more

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votes than in 2003 and its candidate won the key Bogota mayoral race.

Labor Violence

¶6. (U) Labor violence and impunity remain major concerns, but significant progress has been made. Since 2002, labor unions report that murders of unionists for political reasons or common crime fell more than 60%. A resident International Labor Organization (ILO) representative arrived in Colombia in January 2007 to help implement the tripartite agreement committing the GOC to finance the ILO Special Technical Cooperation program and to provide \$1.5 million a year to the Prosecutor General's Office (Fiscalia) to prosecute cases of violence against trade unionists. The additional funding enabled the Fiscalia to create a special sub-unit with nearly 100 prosecutors and investigators to investigate 187 priority cases. Since 2001, the Fiscalia has resolved 56 cases of labor violence, leading to 1)NB7QQJ has taken specific steps to protect labor leaders and other vulnerable individuals. In 2007, the Ministry of Interior and Justice's \$34 million Protection Program helped protect more than 6,900 human rights activists, journalists, politicians, and other threatened individuals, including 1,720 trade unionists. As a result, the murder rate for unionists is now lower than that for the general population.

Human Rights Record

¶8. (SBU) The Uribe Administration continues to make progress on human rights cases involving military abuse or collaboration with paramilitaries. All members of the military and police receive mandatory human rights training. In October 2006, Defense Minister Santos named the first civilian -- and the first woman -- as director of the Military Criminal Justice System. Santos has strongly backed initiatives to address the problem of extrajudicial killings,

changing promotion criteria to favor demobilization of illegal fighters and ordering military personnel to facilitate civilian investigations of all combat deaths. Human rights groups allege that security forces committed 955 extrajudicial killings over the last five years.

¶9. (U) The Fiscalia has also made advances in prosecuting military personnel alleged to have committed human rights abuses. In August, a court convicted three military personnel for the murder of three unionists in Arauca in ¶2004. In November, the Fiscalia ordered the detention of Army Captain Guillermo Gordillo for his participation in the massacre of eight civilians near San Jose de Apartado in February 2005. The Fiscalia has also set up a special prosecutorial team to investigate cases of alleged extrajudicial killings.

U.S. Assistance

¶10. (SBU) In January 2007 the Colombian government presented a Plan Colombia "consolidation strategy" pledging a Colombian investment of \$78 billion through 2013. The proposal emphasizes the importance of building social cohesion, assigning substantial resources to help strengthen local governance, protect human rights, and help displaced people, Afro-Colombians, and indigenous. It also aims to reintegrate 45,000 demobilized ex-combatants and deserters and to promote Colombia's licit exports. The Colombian government seeks funding from the United States and European countries to complement its own resources.

¶11. (SBU) Under Plan Colombia, the USG has provided more than \$5 billion in assistance, including \$600 million in economic and social assistance. USG security assistance combats drug trafficking and terrorism through training, equipment, and technical assistance. It also supports Colombian military aviation, essential for all programs -- civilian or military -- outside Colombia's major cities.

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U.S. social and economic aid focuses on alternative development, displaced persons, human rights and democratic institutions, and reintegration of demobilized fighters.

Drug Eradication and Interdiction

¶12. (SBU) Eradication of coca and poppy crops and interdiction of cocaine and heroin reached near-record levels in 2007. President Uribe supports greater manual eradication, but understands that manual eradication cannot replace aerial eradication without a sharp increase in expenditures. He seeks a complementary approach using both methods. In 2007, the National Police and military forces seized almost 150 metric tons of cocaine and coca base, and destroyed 200 cocaine laboratories. We continue to work with the Colombian government to refine our eradication strategy and determine how best to transfer key tasks from the USG to the Colombian Government.

Extradition

¶13. (SBU) Since taking office, President Uribe has approved 581 extraditions to the United States, including a record number of 164 in 2007. Among those extradited in 2007 were 11 members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and three members of the United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC).

Demobilization and Peace Process

¶14. (SBU) Over 32,000 former paramilitaries have demobilized since 2002, and a further 13,000 have deserted from other illegal armed groups (about one-half from the FARC). Police estimate there are 23 emerging criminal groups with a combined membership of 2300 persons. Reintegration programs and targeted law enforcement are working to counter these emerging groups. Under the Justice and Peace Law (JPL) process, over 50 former paramilitary leaders have been jailed, and many are confessing their participation in violent crimes. To date, the JPL process has revealed the location of the graves of almost 1200 paramilitary victims and provided information on 3600 crimes. Over 80,000 victims have registered under the JPL, and the GOC is working on measures to provide reparations. The Supreme Court and the Fiscalia -- with GOC support -- also continue to investigate politicians with alleged paramilitary ties. So far, 52 Congressmen, 19 mayors and 11 governors have been implicated in the scandal.

¶15. (SBU) The ELN has negotiated with the Colombian government for over two years on a ceasefire agreement, but ELN infighting and FARC pressure have prevented a deal. The ELN continues to kidnap civilians to fund its operations, but its military capability continues to decline. The FARC has rebuffed GOC initiatives to engage in any meaningful peace talks, and killed eleven state legislators that they had held hostage in July 2007. The GOC authorized Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez to facilitate peace talks between the Colombian government and the FARC and ELN in late 2007, but subsequently suspended his role after Chavez intervened in Colombia's internal politics.

U.S. Hostages

¶16. (SBU) The three U.S. contractors captured by the FARC in February 2003 are the longest held U.S. hostages in the world. A November 2007 video seized by the GOC showed proof-of-life of the three Americans. Their safe release remains a top priority. President Uribe has assured us that any humanitarian exchange will include the U.S. hostages. On January 10, the Colombian Government authorized the International Committee of the Red Cross -- working with Venezuela -- to recover FARC-held hostages Clara Rojas and Consuelo Gonzalez de Perdomo.

Brownfield